THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

No Private Presents

May 2, 1999
John M. Buchanan

"Paul Tillich once said that the saint is a saint not because he is good, but because he is transparent for something that is more than himself. Being a window of opportunity, being a means of grace, being the place where the Holy Spirit makes its dwelling, is the vocation of ordinary people. That is why shepherds are summoned to the manger, that is why women are summoned to the tomb on resurrection morning, that is why fisherfolk and the most ordinary of ordinary people around are summoned into the vanguard of the Jesus movement, so that through them, through us, Christ might be seen and known. This is the continuing miracle of Easter.

Sermons
Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living
Peter Gomes

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

John 14: 1-7; Acts 7: 55-60

"To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good."
1 Corinthians 12:7

Dear God, we thank you for this bright and beautiful day; for the time to be together; for friends with whom to worship; for a church to nurture our faith and call for our commitment; and for a sense of your lively presence. Now startle us with your truth and your word, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There is nothing like a harsh dose of reality to make you question your vocational choice. One of the most difficult times for me was the summer after my ordination and installation as a new Presbyterian minister. Actually, the transition from student to full-time, first year minister is not very dramatic, economically speaking, or at least it wasn't in those days. Come to think of it, it still isn't exactly landing suddenly in a garden of affluence. New ministers make about what new school teachers make and that's about what you make driving a bus or doing a number of other useful things. That's not why we get into this business, obviously. But for all of us, not just clergy, there comes a harsh confrontation with reality early on in our working lives.

Mine happened when we decided to use our first real vacation to visit a few of our college friends in the East, in the new maroon Chevy Bel Aire of which I was sinfully proud, until during the first week I owned it, a member of the Junior High youth fellowship threw up in the back seat—but that's another story.

In any event, in my new Chevy, a symbol that, after years of poverty, we had reached a level of comfort and affluence and respectability, we visited first a fraternity brother who, while I was in Divinity School studying the Old Testament and learning how to translate Greek, had been going from triumph to triumph at IBM. He had just sold a new computer system to a huge group of Delaware chicken farmers. It was a new split level home I recall, and he was driving a Volvo. It was sobering.

Our next stop was to visit teachers who had worked in public education for a year, then bolted to the private sector. He was now a rising star with Xerox. They also lived in a very comfortable suburb, in a split level home. He, I recall, was driving a spiffy sports car, a Karman Ghia, I think. She drove the sleek Buick.

When we returned to Indiana I called my best friend who had just started at a tiny little United Church of Christ congregation in Michigan and asked, "Jake, do you think we could maybe serve God just as faithfully in the business world?"

There is probably no more relevant matter for any of us than vocation: discovering and identifying what you are supposed to do and then figuring out a way to do it. What a blessing, I often think, to be paid money to do what I'd do for the love of it. And yet, for many, that blessing remains elusive, if not out of the question, and for all of us the complex matter of vocation is with us, year in and year out, all our lives.

At a conference on "Unity and Diversity in the Church" which I attended last week, I found myself sitting at a round table with several other Presbyterians, engaged in the inevitable get acquainted, community-building exercises. We were telling about our jobs. The young man next to me, an African-American, a brand new Presbyterian minister just completing his first year, an absolutely delightful young man, told how, in college, he had become involved with a Presbyterian church and began to feel drawn to ministry. When he announced to his parents, who were not church people at all, that he was going to seminary, they were, as often happens, surprised, then disappointed—not happy with the prospect at all. "Why in the world would you want to do something like that?" they asked him.

He did it: went to seminary, got his degree, was ordained and now installed in his first church, a small congregation in North Carolina. His parents drove down to visit to hear his first sermon and before you knew it they got hooked, and now they're active Presbyterians and proud of him. "But, you know," he said to us, "it's funny, but now that I'm in it, I keeping hearing their question: what in the world am I doing here?" It was a moment of refreshing candor and people at the table assured him that he was not the only person; preacher, teacher, attorney, homemaker who asks that profoundly honest and relevant question and that it will continue to be asked all your life: what am I supposed to do and how can I manage to do it?

Our text this morning is not one of the more pleasant incidents in the New Testament. The stoning of Stephen, the very first Christian martyr, is in a way a story about vocation, not only because of what happens to Stephen, but also because of what later happens to another young man who is watching and approving and keeping an eye on the coats. It is also a reminder that vocations can be costly as well as blessed: that there are no guarantees that good work will be rewarded appropriately every time.

The first thing that happens after the public execution of Jesus of Nazareth by crucifixion and his resurrection on the first day of the next week, the first thing that happens after Jesus, is the Christian Church. His followers start to talk and then speak publicly and forcefully and eloquently. Common, ordinary uneducated fisherfolk are standing up in public places delivering powerfully persuasive speeches and lots of people are listening and nodding their heads in agreement and stepping forward to be baptized and to become part of the following.

The Jesus incident is becoming a mass movement, someone noted. It makes great reading. The Acts of the Apostles tells the story. 3,000 people respond when Peter preaches. And then immediately there are growing pains. It's one thing to be a loose-knit band of

disciples walking from synagogue to synagogue in Galilee. It's another thing altogether to deal with 3,000 new converts in downtown Jerusalem with no building, no staff, no computers, no stewardship campaign, no parking lot.

It was their custom from the very beginning to make sure that everyone had enough to eat. Daily they shared their food and distributed some to those who had none—a simple matter when there are ten or twenty. But 3,000! So some aren't getting fed, the Greek speaking converts, as a matter of fact, and they complain and the new church has to do something new; get organized, create an administrative structure, make a plan and generate leadership, find new leaders, commission them and put them to work.

That's how a young man named Stephen emerges. He's one of several selected to distribute food. The first Christian leaders, that is to say, are servants of the community. They are the diaconate, the first Board of Deacons, an interesting leadership paradigm, to say the least, and the apostles lay hands on them and they go to work, waiting on tables and as occasion arises, raising their voices to tell the story. That's what gets Stephen in trouble. He tells it just like Peter did, but instead of 3,000 converts, Stephen gets arrested. In his self-defense he insults his accusers. A crowd becomes a violent lynch mob and they take Stephen out and stone him to death.

Stephen's career was brief but its impact would not be. The young man over in the corner of the picture, watching the coats of the ones throwing the stones was a radical, arch-conservative pharisee by the name of Saul, who was devoted to stamping out the new Christian church. You never know who you are speaking to, you never know who is watching and assimilating and pondering and being influenced by your example. Saul would never forget what he saw that day, that strong, faithful young man dying for his convictions, praying with his last breath, a paraphrase of the ancient Jewish bed time prayer: "Lord, receive my spirit." Only Stephen prayed "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" as he died, and young Saul of Tarsus never forgot it. He would, shortly thereafter, have a major change of heart, a conversion on the road to Damascus. He would take a new name, Paul. He would become one of a small handful of people about whom one can say that the rest of history is not conceivable apart from their efforts, and he too would die violently with those same words in his heart and perhaps on his lips: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

I've never preached on the stoning of Stephen before and part of the reason is I didn't know what to say about it that would do it justice. But this time, for some reason, the young man in the corner suddenly came into focus for me and it occurred to me that whatever Saul later became and whatever the Church of Jesus Christ later became and, in fact, our being here in a Christian Church, or a culture that has its very roots in Christian history and Christian values, began when the young man found his vocation stirring in his soul as he watched another brave young man lay down his life for his convictions.

There is no more important task for any of us than discovering what we are supposed to do and figuring out how to do it.

One of the most durable heresies has been the idea that God gets involved in the whole matter of how we spend our lives only occasionally when God needs to do a little recruiting, needs a few more women or men in professional ministry. So durable is that

idea that conventional wisdom says that to have a vocation means a church vocation. To have a calling, which is what vocation means, is to be called to ministry. Becoming a homemaker, military officer, doctor, social worker, salesperson, accountant, broker, trader, organist, police officer, attorney or professional athlete is a matter of economics or personal interest, but ultimately it's your own private decision with no particular religious significance.

It was the Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther in particular who came up with the revolutionary idea that God has something in mind for each and every one of us; that God calls all of us; that each of us has a vocation. Luther called it the "priesthood of all believers" and said being a good and honest butcher or shoemaker was as holy a vocation as being a priest of the church. Protestants sometimes use Luther's priesthood of believers to argue against the Roman Catholic office of priest, but that totally misses the point. What Luther meant was that God has work for each of us to do, not just the religious professionals. Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

> "We should revive Luther's vision of the priesthood of all believers. . . . To believe in one's own priesthood is to see the extraordinary dimensions of an ordinary life, to see the hand of God at work in the world and to see one's own hands as necessary to that work. Whether those hands are diapering an infant, assembling an automobile or balancing a corporate account, they are God's hands, claimed by God at baptism for the accomplishment of God's will on earth."

How do you know what part of God's major work plan is yours to do? How do you know what your assignment is? That is the key question. How do you know your vocation, your very own calling? Again, conventional wisdom, perhaps informed by too many Hollywood portrayals, is that God calls us in a voice in the night, a voice like James Earl Jones or Charlton Heston before he became the voice, not of God, but of the National Rifle Association. But I don't think it happens like that much. It hasn't for me nor for most of the people I know. Identifying your vocation is a life long process of discernment and a life long process of creative effort to do what God calls us to do.

A starting point for all of us is simply assessing the gifts God has given us. I love the line in *Chariots of Fire* when the Scottish Olympic hopeful, Eric Liddell, is home to visit his family. His sister is trying to persuade him to give up running in order to be a missionary, to which he also feels called and which he eventually did after winning the Olympic gold. And Liddell says something like "God has made me fast and when I run I feel his pleasure."

In her book *Come Sing, Jimmie Joe,* Katherine Paterson tells the story of a boy whose family sings country music as a group. Jimmie Joe is a good singer but hates to sing in public. His grandmother takes him aside and has a heart to heart talk with him about his gift. The clincher is, "God don't give no private presents," from which I took the title for this sermon.

No private presents. God gives us gifts to be shared. No matter who you are, no matter how modestly you regard yourself, God blesses you with skills and abilities, unique personality traits, capacities that are unique to you, and which are given, according to St. Paul, writing long ago about his own vocational crisis, to be used for the common good.

Quaker theologian Parker Palmer makes the intriguing suggestion that sometimes God's call comes in experiences of disappointment. Sometimes our plans, our hopes, our aspirations, don't pan out. We don't get the job, we're not accepted in the graduate program we know would launch our career. Sometimes the answer is "no" and we are crushed. But, Palmer says, when a door closes behind us, the whole world opens up in a new way ahead of us.

Professor James Fowler has written very helpfully about the topic and suggests that most of us think about our vocation in times of doing something we don't want to do and would not choose to do, given our own wishes and hopes and aspirations. But maybe, Fowler suggests, to do what God has in mind just might be to discover what we really want to do and for which we are uniquely and superbly gifted to do.

I love the way Frederick Buechner puts it. How do you know it's God's voice and not your own? he asks. And answers, "The kind of work God calls you to do is the kind of work, a.) that you need most to do, and b.) the kind of work the world most needs to have done. . ." The place God calls you to, Buechner says, "is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (*Wishful Thinking, p.118-119)*

Stephen felt the call of God and became a servant and then a spokesperson for his Lord and for the Christian Church. For him there came a moment when he had to be and do what God prepared and gave him the gifts to do. He died for his faithfulness.

So did coach Dave Sanders at Columbine High School two weeks ago when he hurried students out of the cafeteria and shielded and protected them and then died for his bravery and commitment. So did Cassie Bernall, age 17, who was asked if she believed in God and in that moment simply said what she was and what she believed, and died for her integrity.

Pray God you and I will not be brought to that moment. But pray God that we will have the faith and integrity and courage to acknowledge the gifts God has given, not to hide them or ignore them or pretend that we don't have anything to give, but to acknowledge our gifts and to put them at God's service, doing the works to which God calls us.

The moment to decide comes when we chose a career. But it also comes in the context of your life and mine daily. They are seldom dramatic moments, seldom public moments. They are times when God's hand rests upon us and summons us to put it on the line—to do and to be what God has created us to do and be. It does not always mean going to seminary. It does not always mean quitting anything and starting all over again. Of course it may. But mostly I believe it means knowing, deep in your soul—

That God does not give private presents;

That God knows you and has given you unique gifts;

And that your life, your fullness and wholeness and ultimately your joy, depends on identifying what you are supposed to do, figuring out how to do it.

Amen.